

Performance, resources, politics to determine postsecondary education reform success

May 30 marked the 10th anniversary of the signing of Kentucky's acclaimed postsecondary education reform legislation, popularly known as HB1. The anniversary provides an opportunity to review where we have been and where we are going.

The final verdict will not be rendered for several years, but we know enough to make some preliminary judgments.

We know that the legislation has focused attention on the right things: increasing educational attainment, improving the quality of life and raising the standard of living.

We know that focus has led to increased enrollments in colleges and universities and to increased numbers of graduates.

But we know also that many challenges remain. Too many students fail to graduate from high school, and of those who do, too many come to college unprepared. Too many college students fail to graduate in a timely manner. And too many adults lack a high school diploma.

Improved performance needed at all levels

We have, in other words, a mix of good news and bad news.

Looking ahead, the question of whether the mix tilts more toward the good news or bad news end of the continuum will be determined by performance, resources and politics. And to paraphrase the words of a once popular song, you can't have one without the others.

Increased educational attainment will require unprecedented levels of performance from all levels of education: elementary and secondary education, adult education, community colleges and universities.

It also will require economic development strategies that encourage the development and retention of a more highly educated work force.

The council has defined what it will take just to be at the national average in educational attainment by 2020, the date set by HB1 for achievement of reform goals.

It will take doubling the number of baccalaureate degree holders. We will need 800,000 baccalaureate degree holders, instead of the 400,000 we now have.

More students must graduate from high schools prepared for college. More students must graduate from colleges and universities prepared for life and work.

More adults lacking a high school diploma must attain their GED and continue their education. More students must transfer from community colleges to four-year institutions.

And ways must be found to increase the pool of



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COMMENT**

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highly educated citizens immigrating to Kentucky from other states and countries.

Investments to make — and ignore

Increasing educational attainment will require increased resources; it also will require increased accountability for outcomes.

Discussions about resources and accountability for outcomes will be tough but essential.

There will be those who will insist we can improve performance only by spending more, and there will be those who insist we can improve performance without spending more. Both ideas are wrong.

HB1 identified the right questions to be asked in pursuit of its goals: What do we need from higher education? What can we do better? What strategic investments will produce the results we need?

The essential resource decisions are those about which investments to make and which to ignore. Improved performance will result only if the right questions triumph over the wrong ideas.

Politics is the ultimate determinant

At the end of the day, political decisions, both those of the postsecondary community and those made in more public arenas, will determine whether we realize HB1's promise of an improved quality of life and an increased standard of living.

The best decisions will be those that are the most consistent with the basic architecture of HB1.

They will be comprehensive in their scope, long term in their outlook, and focused on the needs of the commonwealth rather than on parochial concerns.

James Madison once said, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." They aren't, and it is.

How we practice our politics — whether in the cloisters of academe or in the halls of Frankfort and Washington — and whether that practice is more often right than wrong, more often good than bad, will be the ultimate determinant of whether we achieve the goals set for us.

The jury is still out on educational reform, but all of us should recognize that we are members of that jury, and the verdict is ours to deliver.

Tom Layzell is president of the Council on Postsecondary Education.

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